

University of Groningen

The mirror image

Muda, G.E.

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2011

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Muda, G. E. (2011). *The mirror image: The representation of social roles for women in novels by Charlotte Brontë, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Jean Rhys*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. s.n.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The most constant thing in life is change.¹

Introduction

In all of the novels examined in the previous chapters, women writers have used images resembling the traditional female images of the 'Angel in the House' and the more rebellious or 'monstrous' woman. Besides using these images in themselves, Brontë, Chopin, Wharton, and Rhys have also compared and contrasted these images and the female protagonists representing them. Without too overtly stating that the patriarchal society of the period 1849-1930 was still oppressive for women, these women writers show this to the reader through the images and narrative structures they use. What all four women writers succeed in through the use of the stereotypes and the mirroring technique is to depict the prejudice society still has with regard to the position of the woman and the social roles expected of her. At the same time, the comparison of the various female figures also reveals what the reaction of women to such a treatment by society was like.

The mirror image

The mirroring used in all four novels has been shown to be one of the main ordering structures of these novels. Not only has it shaped the structure of each story, however, it has also influenced the contemporary reader's understanding of each novel. Rather than just accepting the story's meaning 'at face value,' it has encouraged readers to think more deeply about the issues represented in each novel. In this, it has succeeded to develop into a consciousness-raising technique, without, however, becoming didactic or propagandistic. Leaving the 'autonomy' of literature intact, the original, complex and lively application of the mirroring technique by each author could pass on new ideas about the possibilities for women in an authentically artistic and socially acceptable way. Each author has been shown to have a slightly different approach.

The style Brontë uses in her novel *Shirley* has been described as social realism. At the beginning of the story both female protagonists are depicted as quite different, with each character realistically portraying the image connected with her. The third person narration together with an omniscient narrator who is involved and interested, but not too emotional, ensures an emphatic and concerned stance from the reader. Yet, the reader's involvement is not too intense and throughout the novel one observes the events and developments from a certain distance. Caroline Helstone resembles the typical 'Angel in the House,' while Shirley Keeldar can be seen as challenging this role. Up to the middle of the novel, both characters seem to influence each other, without one really taking the lead. Eventually, however, Caroline's influence over Shirley prevails. Her example and Yorkshire society's expectations prove to be stronger than Shirley's search for freedom, independence, and individuality. Shirley's final surrender to Louis is another sign of her adaptation. In

¹ This is a free translation of a statement made by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 535 BC – 475 BC). He is reported to have said: "Everything flows, nothing stands still." It is quoted by Plato in *Cratylus*, and by Diogenes Laertius in *Lives of the Philosophers* Book IX, section 8.

Conclusion

Brontë's novel, the more rebellious character is still successfully 'corrected' by her mirror image, though the reader is given a detailed impression of what both conformist and non-conformist behavior were like. Overall, *Shirley* proved acceptable reading for the contemporary reader. Brontë's quite moderate application of the mirroring technique, the traditional ending of the novel, and the represented adherence by both female protagonists to the traditional norm and value system ensured that the book was well received and widely read. Brontë did criticize contemporary society in the novel, but the events in the novel were supposed to take place in an earlier historical period and, overall, Brontë mainly 'pleaded for' better schooling and more useful occupations for women. Most contemporary readers could not really find any fault with such requests.

The second novel under examination, *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, already gives a different impression. The style of this novel is quite different from the earlier one and has been typified as emotional realism. The mirroring of the main characters here clarifies many aspects of Louisiana society in the 1890s. The story is again told in the third person and has an omniscient narrator. Both women are represented as being quite happy with the lifestyle selected by each of them. Adèle Ratignolle tries to warn Edna at several points in the novel that the contemporary social context disapproves of Edna's liberated behavior. They remain great friends and Edna does listen to her, but she does not succumb to the influence of her mirror image. At important points in the novel, she also gets the support from the narrator for her unusual behavior. The social environment, on the other hand, is realistically depicted as the conservative and Catholic society that it was. The apparent influence of the mirror images on each other seems to be more equal here. Chopin's use of the stereotypes and the mirroring technique give a revealing impression of the repressive nature of patriarchy. The social roles for women turn out to be clearly defined and limited to the roles of wife, housewife, and mother. If a woman does not fit into one of those pigeon holes, there is no place for her in society. The social criticism expounded by Chopin in this novel mainly concerned economic inequality and a need for women to be sexually independent; but this was interpreted as too straightforward by Louisiana literary critics. They also condemned what they perceived as the narrator's occasional siding with Edna throughout the story. Chopin's friends and acquaintances and many ordinary readers indicated that they liked the novel. However, as the novel was heavily criticized in the local press, it was not reprinted and because it had not been widely distributed at first anyway, it remained quite obscure for many years. The novel was never banned, as has sometimes been stated, but more subtle means thus ensured that Chopin's ideas were not widely spread at the time.

The society realism of *The Age of Innocence* again presents a different picture. This time the 'Angel in the House' is May Welland. May does indeed look like, and behave like an 'angel' for the greater part of the novel, but in the course of the story her image also becomes slightly tainted because of her behavior. May's mirror image, Ellen Olenska is at first portrayed as the rebellious 'monster,' but the more Ellen succeeds in gaining a place for herself in Old New York society, and the more we see of her kind, upright, thoughtful, and individualized behavior, the less applicable this image seems to be. The novel is told in the third person with the strong presence of an omniscient narrator who comments on both events and characters in such a way that a certain distance is created for the reader. We witness the developments without becoming too involved, and, overall, it is mainly the contemporary society of the 1870s and its still rigid norm and value system that is judged.

Both women are portrayed as adapting to the social context and accepting the lives they can lead, but May dies whilst nursing a sick child and Ellen returns to Paris. It is only in a different society that Ellen can live her life as she likes best, but at least she has the financial support of her family and the impression the reader gets from her life in Paris is that it is quite fulfilling. Wharton's intelligent handling of the mirroring process and her adoption of a male protagonist who contemplates the 'woman question' ensure that her novel is considered acceptable reading in the 1920s. The fact that the novel was a best-seller and that Wharton received the Pulitzer Prize for it also guaranteed a great many readers. Her almost automatic assumption that women were equal and her portrayal of thoughtful and intelligent women seemed to be a more acceptable, though sometimes almost unnoticed, means of conveying emancipatory messages, than a more extreme use of the mirroring technique. The criticism of society expressed in *The Age of Innocence* is quite severe; but it concerns an earlier historical period and it is expressed in an ironic though respectful way towards that older society. There is a sense of melancholy throughout the story and the social context is criticized in a wider sense. Wharton does not specifically plead for women's sexual liberation or economic equality. Instead, she pleads for more respect for both the male and female individual. This made her novel acceptable and popular reading. The contemporary reading strategies with their focus on the distribution of moral values could not really find any fault with this novel, whereas Chopin's more daring approach had really upset a great part of the Louisiana reading public.

In the last novel under examination, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* by Jean Rhys, the mirroring strategy is used again, but with a twist. Jean Rhys' writing style is not as 'realistic' as the style of the earlier writers and approaches modernism. This results in a sometimes slightly exaggerated portrayal of the images of the 'angel' and the 'monster.' At the same time, her novel is also shorter than the books discussed earlier, and in spite of the more limited space her almost grotesque treatment of the images allows her convincingly to portray the available social roles for women, and the still repressive tendencies in both Paris and London society. The story is again told in the third person and an omniscient narrator alternately focuses on one or the other character in the novel. The narrator seems to be observant, rather than emphatic, thus creating a certain distance to the characters and events. In this way, the reader is encouraged to critically follow the depicted developments without becoming too emotionally involved. Julia Martin depicts the 'monster' through most of the novel, and her sister, and 'mirror image' Norah Griffiths seems to represent the 'angel,' but neither of these terms is sufficient or appropriate by now. It is only in the middle section of the novel that they are actually compared; this is enough to reveal the still limited spectrum of social roles available for women in Western Europe in the 1930s. It also becomes clear from the depiction of the social context that women seemed to have no choice but to behave in a certain way, regardless of their more personal preferences and characteristics. This tendency is indeed present in all of the novels, but its most extreme representation can be found in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*. It is interesting to see that in the course of the story the 'good' and 'bad' aspects of both female protagonists are depicted in such a way that in the mirroring process the distinction between them becomes blurred even more than in *The Age of Innocence*. This ultimately presents a more genuine picture of woman as an individual. At the same time, it is mainly contemporary society, the division of power-relations within it, and the simply unfair treatment of women that are underlined and revealed to the reader.

Rhys' writing style allows her to be a good deal more outspoken about patriarchy than the other novels were. Rhys juxtaposes characters and events in such a way that, even though the characters sometimes become almost caricatural, the fact that she is representing a crisis situation for women becomes quite obvious. The personal crises in the lives of these women match the crises going on in society as a whole. The entire social order in the 1930s was in turmoil with severe financial and political upheavels and uncertainties. Rhys' controlled handling of the story with the deliberate use of narrative techniques, but never a word too much, allows her to be quite direct about women's need for financial, sexual, and social independence. The period in which she wrote, and her style of writing, permit her to be more forthright than Brontë, Chopin, and Wharton could be. The contemporary socio-historical context as a whole had changed considerably throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so much so that a woman novelist could by now openly plead her own cause.

In general, the use of the stereotypical mirror images allowed women to write seemingly traditional stories with acceptable female figures. It is the mirroring technique that helps them with the process of "assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing" the traditional images (Gilbert & Gubar, 76). The images of 'the angel' and 'the monster' and the mirroring of them become important as a parallel for the contrast between the "publicly ... acceptable facades" and women's "private and dangerous visions" (Gilbert & Gubar, 74). By thus rewriting the stereotypical image(s) of women, Brontë, Chopin, Wharton and Rhys not only give expression to their feelings of frustration and anger, they also present alternative figures to the reader. These different and sometimes daring images and behavioral patterns open up new possibilities for contemporary women readers. Without compromising themselves, these women readers could get acquainted with more emancipated behavioral patterns, and a more liberated view of society.

Hegenbarth-Rösigen's concepts and her method have proved useful in discovering the working of the narrative strategies and consciousness-raising processes applied by these four women writers. Hegenbarth-Rösigen ends her own study with the following:

The third reaction that is theoretically possible in the fictional medium of the novel, namely the conscious, systematic reflection that supports and legitimizes the change of the role of the woman as an element of modernization is not present in the literature of the nineteenth century.²

This statement might be true in relation to the novels that she studies. She focuses on the works of the French (male) novelists Emile Zola, the Goncourt brothers, Daudet, Huysmans, and Prévost. Yet, the opposite is true for the writings of the women authors discussed in this dissertation. Brontë, Chopin, Wharton, and Rhys have reflected the changes going on in society in their work, and may even have contributed to the emancipation process with their novels. Both the concepts and the method Hegenbarth-Rösigen expounds in her study are useful tools in discovering and describing how the narrative strategies used by writers might work. In the novels by these women writers, the

² In Hegenbarth-Rösigen's study the passage is as follows:

"Die dritte im fiktionalen Medium des Romans theoretisch mögliche Reaktion, nämlich die bewußte systematische Reflexion, die den Wandel der Frauenrolle als Element der Modernisierung bejaht und legitimiert, bleibt in der Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts eine Leerstelle," 223-224.

concepts and method have a somewhat different effect than in the works by the male authors she examines. It is especially the mirroring of the female main characters that achieves this effect. Rather than accepting the prevalent norm and value system at face value, the *thematization* of the social context by these women writers offers and honors the possibility for reflection on and adaptation of the contemporary system denied by the male writers studied by Hegenbarth-Rösgen.

Bourdieu and Passeron's studies concerning reproduction in education, society and culture at first seem to deny the possibilities for social change. However, a close look at their later work reveals that they are very much aware that change takes place, anyway, in spite of the sometimes rigid reproductive social systems. As soon as enough people support and accept different behavioral patterns, even conservative elements in society cannot really stop new developments.

Practical changes in the actual social context of the time-span 1849-1930 helped women, as well. It became easier for women to have access to books, because of the appearance of public libraries, and they had more leisure time that they could spend to their own liking. Western European society was still quite traditional, but everyday life seemed more lenient towards the introduction of new ideas and more liberated patterns of behavior. This process developed rather slowly, but these four novels clearly represent the changes that occurred. Ranging from the introduction of new styles in fashion to the appearance of more women in the workplace and the public sphere, the process of emancipation gradually evolved. These women writers have not only depicted the changes taking place in the behavioral patterns and social roles for women, they have also contributed to them through the glimpses of more liberated patterns of behavior they have introduced. These glimpses could be picked up in the very intense and personal experience of reading a novel. The new ideas were introduced in a very private context and were made a part of the reader's own consciousness. Without overtly promoting the establishment of a different type of society, these women authors may well have contributed to the emancipation process through the narrative strategies they used, as contemporary reviews reveal.

Reading strategies

Corse and Westervelt's suggested reading strategies by reader groups throughout the period 1849-1930 indicated that it was customary to read novels for their moral instruction at the time. *Shirley* and *The Age of Innocence* fitted into this trend, but *The Awakening* was considered too extreme concerning its depicted 'requests.' Reading strategies seemed to be changing, however, and in spite of the quite angry and extreme approach employed by Rhys, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* was praised by both the wider critical context and the individual reader.

Iser's theories about the reading process have suggested how these fictional texts could have influenced the consciousness of the individual reader. The effectiveness of the techniques used in the novels in this context is realized especially through the evocation and subsequent negation of the familiar. What at first seemed to be an affirmation of the contemporary reader's assumptions about social roles for women leads to their possible rejection of them, thus tending to prepare readers for a re-orientation. This is what Brontë, Chopin, Wharton and Rhys have consistently done in their novels with the introduction of the 'mirror image.' The comparing and contrasting of both familiar and new behavioral

patterns for women, allows a rethinking of the options open to women. Iser believes that it is only when readers have surpassed their personal preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that they are in a position to gather new experiences. As the novels discussed here involve the contemporary reader in the formation of new ideas and the simultaneous formation of the means by which the old notions are punctured, reading reflects the process by which these readers gained actual experience. With their novels, the female authors discussed here did convey a new experience, and, also, an attitude towards that experience. The identification of the reader with one or the other of the mirrored heroines in the novel proved to be a 'stratagem' by means of which the authors could try to stimulate new attitudes in the contemporary reader.

Not all readers agreed with these new possibilities, and only a few female readers would have adopted such behavioral patterns themselves. But the seed was planted. Brontë, Chopin, Wharton and Rhys had been able to pass on their ideas to individual readers in a very private and intense way. By temporarily evoking a different world for their readers, these readers also became part of that world.

The reception

Shirley, *The Awakening*, *The Age of Innocence* and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* represent both conformist and more liberated behavioral patterns for women. The investigation of the general criticism written in relation to the novels and the more individual reader reports shows that both male and female readers were especially intrigued by the depiction of the female main characters. The representation of conformist as well as aberrant behavior seemed to intrigue contemporary readers without fully convincing them to stick to one side. Behavioral patterns that show 'deviant' behavior are also not solely shown by the 'monster' character. Very often it is indeed the 'monster' that depicts this type of conduct, but sometimes it is the 'angel' character who shows less acceptable courses of action. It is the norm negation [by one of the main characters, a minor character, or the plot] that strikes readers the most. Yet, such 'aberrant' behavior could be experienced and evaluated without drastically influencing readers' personal lives and was often reabsorbed by the plot resolution.

Brontë, Chopin, Wharton, and Rhys indicated repeatedly that they were concerned about the position of the woman in their contemporary society. The fact that they themselves wrote and published novels is proof that they considered the scope of behavioral patterns available for women to be wider than was generally acknowledged. Their own more liberated life style shows what women were indeed capable of doing, if only the social context they lived in respected what they tried to achieve. In daily life, women were indeed as much part of contemporary culture as men were, and, even though more conservative ideologies would still debar women from many male activities, daily practice seemed to be more lenient.

The examination of the reception of these novels shows that readers pick up the second story line in all cases, but the story becomes more acceptable to contemporary readers when the reader can also safely read the story without being confronted with behavioral patterns that are too extreme. Too extreme depictions of alternative conventions seem to have the opposite effect. They disconcert readers or critics, rather than intrigue them.

The examination of some contemporary reviews and reader-reports written about *Shirley* demonstrates that most of these readers and reviewers were quite positive about the novel. With its mild application of the consciousness-raising technique, its plea for better education for girls and more useful occupations for women and its traditional ending, *Shirley* could certainly be read by everyone. Readers were still introduced to more liberated behavioral patterns for women. Such behavioral patterns were sometimes criticized; but, on the whole, the more technical aspects of the novel were criticized most severely. The lack of unity of the novel and the abundance of characters received more negative criticism than Shirley's deviant conduct.

The reception of *The Awakening* was quite different. Only a quarter of the reviewers was positive about this novel. Kate Chopin's writing style was generally praised, but the aberrant behavior of Edna Pontellier was heavily censured by Louisiana critics in 1899 who still read novels for their moral messages. Critics were especially upset about Edna's sexual escapades. Quite different proved to be the reaction from the 'ordinary' reader. More personal reader reports and letters show that many of them liked the novel and understood its meaning perfectly. Overall, later generations who read novels from a different perspective, would and could appreciate this novel more.

The public reaction to Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* was unequivocally positive. The various layers of the story were clearly understood. The behavior of both the 'angel' and the more rebellious character were judged, compared and reviewed. However, Ellen's character and conduct was understood and appreciated much more than Edna's persona had been, and the 'Angel in the House,' May, becomes tainted. It is Wharton's subtle and intelligent use of the mirroring technique, and her clever comparison of the 'angel' and the 'monster' image that blurs the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' behavioral patterns and encourages respect for the individual. Overall, however, it is the love-triangle that is especially noted by the contemporary reader; the 'woman question' is paid much less attention to.

The responses to Rhys' *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* were positive as well. It was especially the stylistic aspect of the novel that was praised, and readers were intrigued by the characters that were portrayed. Julia, in particular, received a lot of attention. In 1930, Rhys was still ahead of her time with her extreme portrayal of patriarchy. Her blunt and angry depiction of contemporary society and the limited options for women in such a brutal context shocked some readers and critics. Yet, the contemporary reader reports and reviews that have survived in relation to this novel were, on the whole, more nuanced and well-thought out than some of the articles that were published in relation to the other novels. The angry behavior of Julia, and the sometimes aberrant behavior of Norah made some readers and critics consider it an unpleasant story, but quite a few reviewers stressed that it was society that was most to be blamed for the plight of the female characters.

This is indeed the notion that is conveyed by all four novels that were examined and it is especially the mirroring of both protagonists that enables this depiction of the still restrictive forces in society for all women. Contemporary female readers benefited from the fact that such books as *Shirley*, *The Awakening*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* were readily available, not too expensive, and could even be borrowed from circulating libraries. However, rather than initiating female revolt, these novels allowed readers to get acquainted with different and new behavioral patterns and social roles for

Conclusion

women in a more subtle way. One of the techniques used to do this was the complex use of the mirror image to change the *thematizing* strategy into a real consciousness-raising technique. Fiction thus seems to be able to develop a constructive and inspirational social and historical function in challenging the very stereotypes on which it relies.



Illustration by George Lepape(1887-1971) from *Les choses de Paul Poiret Vues par Georges Lepape*, Paris: Pour Paul Poiret par Maquet, 1911.



Smithsonian Institution Libraries

<http://www.sil.si.edu>